

Scouts with Class

By Skip Williams



This column aims to provide players with tips on creating effective and interesting characters of various types. So whether you're a beginning player creating your very first character or an experienced gamer looking to put some punch into an old standby, this column is for you!

The Pros and Cons of a Scout

The scout offers a potent combination of stealth, speed, and fighting ability. A well-played scout can ferret out danger, strike swiftly and then vanish, and perform many other feats of derring-do.

Scout Assets

Like the rogue, the scout offers a useful array of game abilities that provide lots of room for customization. You can create an outrider for an army, a stealthy infiltrator, a reconnaissance specialist, a guide specializing in wilderness terrain, or even a sneak thief, depending on where you choose to place the character's skill emphasis. Below are several assets you have going for you when you choose a scout.

- **Good Initiative Bonus:** A scout should have a high Dexterity score, primarily because Dexterity provides her first line of defense and governs many of her best skills. But a high Dexterity score also gives her a high initiative bonus. As a result, she can get the drop on her opponents most of the time and is seldom caught unaware.
- **High Skill Points:** With a bountiful eight skill points per level, even a scout with a poor Intelligence score has plenty of skill points to spend.
- **Broad Skill Selection:** The scout has a long list of class skills, most of which involve stealth, movement, perception, and knowledge.
- **Good Reflex Saves:** A scout uses the best save progression in the game for Reflex saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural grace helps her avoid most effects that could deal damage or entrap her, such as area spells, entanglement, and many traps.
- **Many Class Features:** The scout gains lots of useful and deadly class abilities. Among these is the skirmish ability, which allows her to deal extra damage when fighting on the move. She also gains extra speed and fortitude, as well as the power to vanish from sight.
- **Bonus Feats:** A scout gains a bonus feat every four levels. The list available to her is very broad and includes feats that improve her fighting ability, stealth, mobility, defense, and more.

Scout Weaknesses

As with any class in the **D&D** game, the scout's advantages come at a price. Below are a few of the disadvantages

you should keep in mind if you're considering a scout character.

- **Poor Fortitude and Will Saves:** Because a scout has the worst progression for Fortitude and Will saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*), she isn't good at shrugging off effects that attack her body or mind. However, her battle fortitude ability improves her Fortitude saves as she attains higher levels.
- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The scout's 8-sided Hit Dice allow her a respectable hit point total. Given her fairly weak Armor Class and relatively high chance of seeing combat, however, she has no hit points to spare.
- **Fairly Low Armor Class:** The fact that a scout has proficiency with only light armor tends to leave her with a low armor bonus. If she wears heavier armor, many of her class features cease functioning. Her typically high Dexterity modifier adds to her personal defense, but the fact that her Armor Class isn't the best leaves her vulnerable to damage in battle, especially when her mobility is restricted.

Playing a Classy Scout

Great scouts usually use the following techniques, so try to incorporate a few of them into your strategy when you play this kind of character.

Be Bold

No matter what kind of scout you are, you're at your best when leading the way or probing ahead to discover what awaits the group. The party's back rank usually isn't the place for you unless the group needs a rear guard.

Keep Moving

Thanks to your skirmish ability, you do your best fighting while on the move. It pays to keep up your speed rating. Avoid carrying too much gear or loot. Consider feats and skills that help you get around on the battlefield, such as Tumble and Mobility.

Weigh Your Risks

Despite the above advice, beware of getting into trouble that you can't handle. Above all, avoid taking unnecessary chances or putting the rest of the party in danger. You excel at slinking ahead of the party, but don't do so unless you have a pretty good idea of what you stand to gain. If the benefits you can expect from your intended action don't outweigh the risks, think up something else to do.

Keep Your Options Open

You can't always know what tricks and stratagems will work in a given situation, so try to have a backup plan. Likewise, avoid actions that may limit your options in the future. Finally, since escape is often the best option when a situation goes sour, always have a plan for getting out of whatever you've gotten into.

Keep Help Close at Hand

Try to avoid situations that force you to face danger alone. When taking point for your group, don't range so far ahead that your friends can't mount a rescue in a round or two. In a battle, consider who your best allies are.

The Party's Main Warrior: You need to keep moving to take advantage of your skirmish ability, but keep in mind that most other fighting characters are at their best when they can stay put and use the full attack action. So make a point of discussing tactics with the party's fighter types before a battle starts. It's often best to allow a more heavily armored and less mobile character to attack the foe's center while you maneuver around the flanks. Also, avoid moving too far ahead of your fighting allies. You probably won't survive for long if you must fight the enemy alone, even for a few rounds.

The Party's Arcane Spellcaster: This character is weaker and more vulnerable than you are when it comes to physical combat, so be prepared to come to her aid when trouble arises. Your speed and skirmish ability make you a natural rescuer, and you might be the only one who can get free to deal with the situation if the party's arcane spellcaster faces an unexpected threat. This character might also be able to assist you with useful effects such as *fly* or *haste*.

The Party's Divine Spellcaster: Get friendly and stay friendly with your party's cleric, druid, or paladin. This character's healing spells can stave off death, especially if you manage to get poisoned or fall victim to some other debilitating attack. A divine spellcaster also has access to many spells that can assist you, such as *shield of faith*, *bless*, *aid*, and the various ability boosting spells.

Some Key Equipment

The right gear can help to ensure a long and prosperous career for a scout. The essentials include the following.

- **Armor and Shield:** You'll probably want to stick with light armor to avoid compromising your best skills, but even light armor is better than none. Leather or studded leather offers decent protection without interfering too badly with your stealth skills or negating your class features. As a scout, you have no shield proficiency unless you use a feat to get it, but a masterwork buckler won't cause you any difficulty even if you aren't proficient. A chain shirt is generally the best protection available to you, but it's expensive and hinders many of your skills. When purchasing defensive equipment, don't overlook items that conceal you or impose a miss chance when your foes attack you. Thanks to your low Armor Class, you'll often face opponents who can hit you fairly easily. A potion of *blur* or *displacement* can give you a nice edge in combat.
- **Primary Melee Weapon:** Choose a light and handy weapon from the ones with which you're proficient -- namely simple weapons and a small selection of other weaponry. A short sword is fairly effective and also works with the Weapon Finesse feat, which allows you to use your Dexterity bonus for melee attacks. Your most potent combat ability -- skirmish -- is useless to you if you can't hit your foes, so the Weapon Finesse feat can prove a valuable asset.
- **Backup Melee Weapon:** Always have a light weapon -- or two -- handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (such as being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a short sword (a piercing weapon), consider a mace (a bludgeoning weapon) as a backup. A sap can also prove handy for subduing foes the party wishes to question later.
- **Ranged Weapon:** You can greatly increase your survival chances by keeping your foes at a distance during combat. A heavy crossbow deals excellent damage, but it's difficult to use while you're on the move (and you want to keep moving). A composite shortbow offers good range and allows for multiple attacks as your base attack bonus improves. And don't overlook daggers and hand axes, since these weapons can be

thrown as well as used in melee. Don't overlook special items that you can throw. A tanglefoot bag can immobilize a foe, which also provides you with an extra margin of safety. A few caltrops can help deter pursuit when one of your solo forays go bad.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the sage of *Dragon Magazine* for eighteen years. Skip is a codesigner of the **D&D** 3rd edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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